The Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism and Social Cohesion

Jonkers, P.H.A.I.

Published in:
Religion in the Public Sphere

Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

10

The Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism and Social Cohesion:
Response to Anne Sofie Roald and Theo W.A. de Wit

PETER JONKERS
Tilburg University

ABSTRACT

Cultural (including religious) identity can be defined as a symbolic reality, implying that it is vague, fluid and impossible to delineate sharply, but at the same time essential. Although it comprises a lot of contingent elements, these identities cannot be completely reduced to contingent social constructions, since individuals, cultures, religions always stand for essential values. This implies that modern democracies not only have to respect religious pluralism, but should also create a public space in which these values are discussed and thus mediated in order to foster social cohesion.

KEYWORDS

religious pluralism, social cohesion, religion and politics

I . INTRODUCTION

In order to introduce my comment on Anne Sofie Roald's[1] and Theo de Wit's papers,[2] let me start with an example. Some years ago, the Dutch crown

[1] Anne Sofie Roald, 'Multiculturalism and Pluralism in Secular Society: Individual or Collective Rights?', this volume.

princess, Maxima, who is of Argentinean origin, gave a speech, in which she said that, although she had been living in the Netherlands for quite some time, she had no idea what was exactly meant by *the* Dutch identity. Although this remark could hardly be qualified as world-shattering, it nevertheless caused quite a stir, especially in royalist circles. People were convinced that the Dutch crown princess was downplaying what she and her husband, of all people, were supposed to stand for, the Dutch identity in its purity. I interpret this reaction as an illustration, on a on a small scale, of the identity-crisis that not only the Dutch, but also many other Western societies are currently going through. The issue of the role of (particularly non-Christian) religions in the public sphere is another, more fundamental sign of this identity-crisis. More in general this crisis is a consequence of the well-known processes of individualization and secularization that have taken place since the sixties of the 20th century, the devolution of a lot of national legislative power to a supra-national level, but above all the rise of cultural and religious pluralism since the end of last century. They have caused the loss of plausibility of a lot of traditional political and social structures and points of reference that used to give cohesion and orientation to society.

In my comment on the above-mentioned papers I will focus on a question, which is underlying many of the current debates about multiculturalism and religious pluralism in secular societies: How are modern societies, whose essential plural nature urges them to accept the growing religious diversity in some way or another, at the same time able to uphold social cohesion, which is crucial for their identity? The 'how' of my question is not to be understood as an empirical examination of how various societies are de facto dealing with this question, but stands for a philosophical investigation into some of its preconditions. First I shall discuss the problem of cultural identity, and in the final section I shall examine the relation between pluralism and social cohesion.

II. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE DIALECTICS OF PURITY AND IMPURITY

Just as is the case with personal identity, the identity of a society or religious community is easy to discern but at the same time very hard to determine unambiguously. Taking up again the above example it is clear that the identity of Dutch society resembles the English, French or German ones in

[2] Theo W.A. de Wit, 'After Multiculturalism: Response to Anne Sofie Roald,' this volume.

many respects, but also differs from them, e.g. through its language, traditions, political system, history, size etc. But if one wants to delineate this identity precisely and unambiguously, it is hard to come any further than the well-known stereotypes. Furthermore, national characteristics may apply to some citizens but not to others, or in various degrees, they are not at all uniquely Dutch etc. The same holds true with religious identities: many people call themselves Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim by birth and still feel some affinity with these creeds, but do not identify themselves as devout faithful, and surely do not follow all the moral and religious guidelines of the religious community they belong to. This is what Anne Sophie Roald calls the inevitable impurity of (religious) identities, of which she gives some examples in the Islam world, especially regarding the position of women.[3]

The complex issue of social and religious identities deserves to be examined further, since it forms the backbone of the discussion about multiculturalism, as developed in the two papers I comment on. From a sociological perspective multiculturalism refers to the reality of a considerable cultural and religious diversity in a given society. Particularly Western societies, which have been confronted with a dramatic increase of this diversity during the last decades, face the need of developing new strategies to deal with this reality. One of these strategies is political multiculturalism, which can be defined as the policy to allow or even actively promote cultural (including religious) diversity by attributing special individual or collective-rights to specific cultures. The most extreme forms of such a (strong) multiculturalist policy, of which Roald's paper offers various examples, are legal pluralism and the acceptance of new official languages besides the already existing one(s).[4] At the other end of this spectrum we find the policy of cultural and/or religious homogenization or ethnocentrism. Although these two policies seem to be diametrically opposed to each other, the arguments in favor of strong multiculturalism can easily turn into a defense of ethnocentrism, namely when the cultural majority claims collective rights for its own.[5]

This and other paradoxes regarding the policies to deal with the growing impact of multiculturalism in most Western societies make clear that this question deserves to be discussed on a philosophical level, notwithstanding the fact that a lot of reasonable, pragmatic answers to this issue have already been given and successfully implemented. In this paper I want to focus on

[3] Roald, 'Multiculturalism and Pluralism,' section I.
[4] Roald, 'Multiculturalism and Pluralism,' section I.
[5] De Wit, 'After Multiculturalism,' section I.

religious diversity and the place of religions in the public space especially because of the enormous motivational potential religions have always had upon people, both positively and negatively. In contemporary, continental philosophy, the identity of a nation or religion is often defined as a symbolic reality: certain material things, words, gestures and practices get a special meaning, because they refer symbolically to what a national or religious identity stands for. The flag of a country or the national anthem are treated with far more respect than an ordinary piece of cloth or any other song, because they symbolize the nation and thus give it a symbolic identity; the Bible, the Torah or the Quran are treated with more reverence than ordinary books because they have a symbolic meaning as the Word of God or the Prophet, and thus are crucial for the identity of the religious community.[6] Taken together they constitute a symbolic system, such as a nation or a religious denomination. Although the relation between the material things or practices and what they stand for symbolically is rather vague, fluid, and sometimes even arbitrary, people nevertheless identify themselves with these symbols, although, again, there is a great variety within a community as to the symbols they identify with as well as to the degree of their identification. A concrete example of this is the color orange to symbolize the Dutch national identity. The color refers symbolically to the House of Orange, although the colors of the national flag (red, white and blue) could also have been chosen as the color of identification. Moreover, in spite of the fact that the Netherlands is a very individualized country, over the years more and more people have started to wear orange tee-shirts, decorate their houses with orange ribbons and even paint their houses orange when the national football-team takes part in the European or World championships. This shows that the rather vague and fluid nature of symbols to express one's identity does not mean at all that these identities would be fluid and arbitrary as well, so that they could merge into a general cosmopolitan identity, as Julia Kristeva suggests.[7] On the contrary, although there are many similarities in the symbolic expressions of Catholicism and Protestantism, and although both creeds have a lot in common, this does not mean that people would be willing to give up their Catholic or Protestant identity, nor would they be willing to give up the symbols as expressing it. In sum, symbols are the expression of a specific national or religious identity (they cannot be mixed up with other ones), but they are

[6] A. Burms, 'Het eigene: reëel en symbolisch', in R. Breeur and A. Burms, *Ik / Zelf. Essays over Identiteit en Zelfbewustzijn* (Leuven: Peeters 2000), p. 126f.

[7] Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Fayard 1988).

also vague and fluid, so that they cannot be pinpointed unambiguously, once and for all and applicable to all people sharing this identity; in other words there is no one to one relation between these symbols and the identity they stand for.

However, especially when people find themselves in a situation of diaspora or when they have the impression that traditional symbols of their cultural and/or religious identity are jeopardized, then they often react to this by reifying and solidifying their identity by taking these symbols as something absolute. People then cling to material things, words, gestures and practices, so that they lose their symbolic character, and start to serve as the actual essence of their identity, requiring strict observance by all members of a community. This inevitably starts off a process of homogenization, often in combination with segregation, in which one's identity is reduced to a kind of objective checklist, which can be ticked off after having completed a naturalization-course: in order to count as a Dutchman or an Englishman, you have to speak the language of the country, you have to know the political and legal structure of the country, you have to be familiar with a lot of informal dos and don'ts etc.; in order to count as a female Muslim you have to wear a veil and subordinate yourself to male ruling; in order to count as a Catholic you have to obey the Pope uncritically in every respect etc. If this happens, (religious) identity is reduced to a limited number of univocal qualifications, which no longer symbolize this identity, but incarnate it in the strong sense of the word. Philosophically speaking this comes down to a relapse of the symbolic into the imaginary, a solidification and homogenization of a fluid and multi-layered symbolic reality. Anne Sophie Roald gives a number of examples of this mechanism in connection with certain Muslim communities acting as a group and exercising a clear group pressure upon their members. She defines this mechanism as a purification of the impure.[8] However, as Theo de Wit's example at the end of his paper clearly shows, this propensity to purification is by no means the prerogative of Islamic or other traditional communities, but also happens in secularist circles.[9] We can see examples of such a secularist purification of cultural identity quite often in today's public debate. It comes down to the following: in order to be accepted as a full member of secular, Western society, you *have to be* secular, individualist, tolerant to homosexuals etc. But what about Christian communities in modern societies, who definitely refuse to adapt their political arguments to the cur-

[8] Roald, 'Multiculturalism and Pluralism,' section II.
[9] De Wit, 'After Multiculturalism,' section III.

rent secular newspeak, who value strong communities, who claim the right to dislike homosexuals etc.? Are their strong, traditional convictions to be regarded as impurities that need to be cleansed in order to comply with a purified image of Western Modernity? Hence, as De Wit points out correctly, Roald's disqualification, from a feminist perspective, of Islamic women wearing a veil as per se a sign of oppression by the male members of their creed is itself an example of purification or solidification, since wearing a veil can as well be interpreted as a free-chosen, symbolic expression of the religious identity of traditional Islamic women in a secularized world.[10]

Although often motivated by the most laudable intentions, a (strong) multiculturalist policy to attribute collective rights to certain groups, seriously boosts the mechanism of imaginary identification, of solidification what is fluid and of purifying the impure. The right of certain cultural, ethnic or religious groups to differ from others, including from main-stream culture, often leads to cultural insulation and opposition, as well as to a oppression of people who refuse to live up to this image. If the so-called politics of (the recognition of) differences does not refer to substantial values, but only to the abstract right to differ from others, people run the risk of being forced to identify themselves with a solidified or reified image of the culture or religious community to which they belong. Then the differences between cultures and/or religions are highlighted, their similarities are systematically downplayed, and cultural identity is presented as completely homogeneous, so to say a package deal, from which no (partial) escape is possible. The reason why a symbolic identity so easily relapses into an imaginary one is that it is so reassuring, since it arranges things neatly, and enables people to unambiguously distinguish the good guys from the bad ones. One has only to refer to the growing success of populist parties in most West-European countries or to fundamentalist religious movements in order to realize how popular this strategy is. As we all know too well, placing the other outside us is at first sight very effective to realize a very strong sense of social or religious cohesion, but eventually poisons the political discussion on what holds our plural society together. This is not to say that a state should abolish all collective rights, I merely want to make clear that multiculturalism as a policy should not be founded on the abstract right to be different, but on essential human, cultural or religious values for which there is but little room or attention in main-stream society.

[10] De Wit, 'After Multiculturalism,' section II.

The result of my discussion of multiculturalism and (religious) identity is paradoxical: in our times, which are often defined as reflective modernity, we are unexpectedly confronted with a relapse into a kind of irreflexivity or immediacy. To phrase it more concretely: in a multicultural society and especially as a result of multiculturalist policy people take a highly reflective stance with regard to their own cultural or religious identity. But if this self-reflexivity lacks substance, in other words if it is not oriented by an awareness of the essential values that their culture tries to substantiate, and a genuine interest in the ways other cultures are trying to substantiate the same or other essential values, then the inevitable outcome is an attitude of irony, of empty tolerance, as De Wit calls it: people are convinced that all cultures are but contingent social constructions, and need to be tolerated regardless of their substance.[11] However, as Rorty has shown, the ironist is a pathological figure, since people simply need points of reference in order to lead their lives, although they lack any substantial meaning because of their contingency.[12] Because the multicultural society in which we live lacks substance, a reflection about what makes our or other's culture or religion worthwhile breaks down on the incommensurability of (religious or cultural) discourses, so that the only remaining option for society is to relapse in a kind of ethnocentrism, i.e. the gut feeling that there are limits to what one can take seriously, being a clear example of irreflexivity.[13]

III. THE COMPLEX RELATION OF (RELIGIOUS) PLURALISM WITH SOCIAL COHESION

The discussion of the previous section about the complexities of (religious) identity has left us only with negative answers to the question of the relation between multiculturalism and identity, of cultural pluralism and social cohesion. On the one hand, a policy of active multiculturalism, under the heading 'let many flowers blossom' (De Wit), is no option, since it negates the basic fact that identity, on a personal as well as on a cultural and religious level, is a symbolic reality, implying that, as *symbolic,* it is fluid, vague and impossible to delineate sharply, but as a *reality* it nevertheless is fundamental

[11] De Wit, 'After Multiculturalism,' section I.

[12] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), p. 203.

[13] I developed this point further in: Peter Jonkers, 'Contingent Religions, Contingent Truths?' in *Religions Challenged by Contingency. Theological and Philosophical Perspectives to the Problem of Contingency,* Dirk-Martin Grube and Peter Jonkers (eds.), (Leiden: Brill 2008), 161-181.

for who we are. On the other hand, a policy of active homogenization, in combination with cultural and/or religious segregation (the most extreme example of which is ethnic cleansing) is no option either, since it results in a relapse into an imaginary identification, which only accentuates the differences between people and eventually causes hatred and oppression.

In the remainder of this paper I want to offer some positive answers to the question under discussion. I shall thereby use some insights of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* on the relation between religion and politics and apply them to the current debate. Hegel's position comes down to a recognition of the necessity of a separation between state and church in order to realize a basic principle of modernity, viz. religious pluralism, but simultaneously a clear view of the need for a unity between religion and politics in order to uphold social cohesion.[14]

The fundamental reason for the modern state to accept the separation between state and Church as its basic principle and hence to recognize religious pluralism is a direct consequence of the fact that it treats humans as 'persons', and that personhood includes a public and thus legal dimension. In the context of a discussion about freedom of religion Hegel says that being human 'is not just a neutral and abstract quality,' but lies in 'the *self-awareness* as recognized *legal* persons in civil society.'[15] People get this feeling through their free self-determination, including the freedom to choose their creed, and the recognition of this choice by the state. Even if some elements of this creed are at odds with the principles of the state, Hegel thinks it better for the state to refrain from intervening in religious affairs and leave it to internal reasonableness of civil society and its more subtle means of persuasion, like public debate, social pressure etc. Applied to the Roald's position on the freedom of Islamic women to wear a veil, this means that if the state wants to protect these women from oppression by their own religious community by banning the wearing of the veil altogether, the remedy risks to be worse than the disease.[16] Imposing politically correct clothing, behavior or

[14] For an excellent historical overview of (the development of) Hegel's position in this respect cfr. Walter Jaeschke, 'Es ist *ein* Begriff der Freiheit in Religion und Staat,' in *Staat und Religion in Hegels Rechtsphilosophie,* Andreas Arndt, Christian Iber and Günther Kruck (eds.), (Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2009), p. 9ff. I developed my position about this issue further in: Peter Jonkers, 'Das gespannte Verhältnis zwischen Religion und Politik in der Modernität: Versuch einer Aktualisierung der hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie,' in *Hegel-Jahrbuch,* Andreas Arndt (ed.), (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, forthcoming).

[15] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* Allen W. Wood (ed.), H. B. Nisbet (transl.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), § 270fn.

[16] Roald, 'Multiculturalism and Pluralism,' section IV.

opinions or forcing religious communities to accept people with heterodox opinions or deviant behavior or styles of clothing as their members, is not only completely ineffective, but is also patronizing because it affects the self-awareness of the citizens to count as legal persons. In particular, the state thereby is suggestive of ignoring the right of citizens to choose freely their religious affiliation. If the state acts in this way, it paradoxically negates, under the guise of protecting their liberty, the freedom of humans and thus reduces being human to an abstract quality. As Rawls rightly states: 'The principles of political justice do not apply to the internal life of a church, nor is it desirable, or consistent with liberty of conscience or freedom of association, that they should.'[17]

Although the separation between state and Church is a basic principle of modern society, the state also has uphold social cohesion. Consequently it has to intervene if the ideas or practices of religious communities threat vital values of society. To take up the Roald's example of the wearing of the veil again, this means that the state has to protect the right of persons to step out of a cultural or religious community. Hence, state-intervention should not be motivated by religious reasons, but by its obligation to protect religious freedom, in this case the flipside of it, viz. the freedom to be without a specific (religious) culture (Roald). In relation to the role of the state in upholding social cohesion Hegel offers an interesting explanation of the fact that some religions take a hostile attitude towards the state. As the work of Kymlicka and other influential liberal political thinkers show,[18] the liberal state is rather reluctant to explicitly define the common good, leaving it to a large extent up to the individuals to decide how they want to give shape to their lives. But according to Hegel the consequence of such a liberal attitude is that 'the higher spiritual element of what is true in and for itself is placed, as subjective religiosity [...] beyond the confines of the state which [...] is thus completely deprived of its proper ethical character.'[19] So, if the state is unable or unwilling to represent and defend the common good explicitly, it leaves the door wide open to religious or secular individuals or groups to fill up this gap with their own ideas. Of course, in a plural society individual citizens and religious (and secular) communities have the basic right to put forward all kinds of opinions about the common good. But the duty of the state is to bal-

[17] John Rawls, 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,' in John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999) 158.

[18] Cfr. Roald, 'Multiculturalism and Pluralism,' section I.

[19] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* § 270.

ance these opinions with those of others, to relate them to fundamental principles of justice and well-being etc. This implies that in a multicultural society the state has to supplement its attitude of passive neutrality by a policy of active neutralization in order to safeguard social cohesion. This means that the state should create a platform and a form, in which our diverging substantial attachments become visible and can be discussed in a mediated way. According to Rawls this is an essential element of deliberative democracy, and it concretely is provided by the media, educational institutions, and cultural and religious groups including churches, which contribute to fostering the relevant encounter.[20] We then no longer completely coincide with our religious or cultural identities, but only *represent* them, so that we can reflect upon them. By creating such a representative form the state is able to neutralize our immediate gut feelings and thus to protect us against our own individual or collective egotisms, be the Christian, Islamic or secular.

[20] Rawls, 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,' p. 139; and Patrick Riordan, 'Permission to Speak: Religious Arguments in Public Reason,' in *Heythrop Journal* 45 (2004), 178-196, p. 184.